

Chile Says It Will Free Prisoners

Partial Release Follows Carter Rights Statement

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SANTIAGO, Chile, Nov. 16—The military government announced today that it is releasing all but 20 political prisoners held without charge under Chile's 3-year-old state of siege.

No precise number was given of those to be freed but previous government figures indicate that 280 are involved. About 880 others already charged or convicted would not be affected. Church and other human rights groups abroad have charged that from 1,200 to as many as 2,000 persons have disappeared in Chile.

The announcement comes a day after President-elect Jimmy Carter, discussing the human rights situation in Chile and elsewhere, told a news conference: "The allocation of foreign aid and the normal friendship of our country would be determined or affected certainly by the attitude of those countries toward human rights."

Today's measure excluded from release two well-known prisoners—Luis Corvalan and Jorge Montes. They played major roles in the leftist government of President Salvador Allende until the September 1973 military coup. The government did offer to exchange ex-Sen. Corvalan, head of the Chilean Communist Party, for Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky and Montes, a Socialist deputy, for Cuban Hubert Matos — a political prisoner in Cuba for 15 years.

Eighteen other prisoners, called especially dangerous for the security of the state, are to be expelled from Chile as soon as foreign countries are found to take them, the announcement said.

In addition to Carter's statement, the rights issue was put in focus abroad by the recent publication of a U.N. Human Rights Commission report denouncing continued violations despite a "facade" of new civil rights laws. Vote on a resolution is expected

this week.

The government announcement said the prisoner release program, which began in September 1974 and has meant freedom for more than 700 prisoners in the past two years, "should surely be duly appreciated by the free consciences of the world."

A Santiago lawyer who specializes in human rights and prisoner work said, however, that he feared the new move would "lead to new forms of repression." But he said it shows the government's "awareness of the problem of international image, made more serious by the upcoming United Nations resolution and the election in the United States of Jimmy Carter."

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Chile to Free About 280

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The lawyer said the releases coincide with a "period of tranquility" in secret police activity. He said church figures show only 12 persons arrested in October by the secret police, down from 134 in September—of whom some 40 are still missing.

Last month the Catholic Church's Vicariate of Solidarity published a list of 383 persons for whom it said there is "overwhelming evidence" that they had been in the hands of the security forces.

The freed prisoners include Hernan Montealegre, a church-employed human rights lawyer in jail since April without charge and the subject of a heated conflict between the government and the church.

The sudden announcement of the prisoner releases today coincides with increasing debate in Chile among junta supporters about the way to react to Carter's election and new international pressure.

The newspaper El Mercurio, one

of the government's most powerful allies, advised the government to re-examine "internal security" policy in the light of the new circumstances. "It is necessary to conciliate the demands of internal security with those of external security," the newspaper said.